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ABSTRACT

A democracy must tolerate many points of view without becoming divided. Therefore, public educators and the communities they serve are challenged to help students understand political and religious issues without proselytizing. This handbook provides guidelines for beginning the journey toward common ground, for moving from a climate of antagonism to one of national civility. It offers suggestions for modifying personal agendas and seeking common ground built on what a community wants from its schools. Chapter 1 describes the author's experiences as a school board member for the Littleton, Colorado, Public Schools. Chapter 2 describes the political process; specifically, it describes the slow rate at which educational change occurs and identifies key advocacy groups. Chapter 3 offers guidelines for clarifying issues and analyzing their drawbacks and benefits. Suggestions for generating respectful and inclusive community debate are offered in the fourth chapter. It details ground rules for conducting effective community meetings and working with the media. The final chapter examines ways to create and sustain common ground by looking for shared concerns and develop requirements for implementation. (LMI)

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# How to Avoid Crossfire and Seek Common

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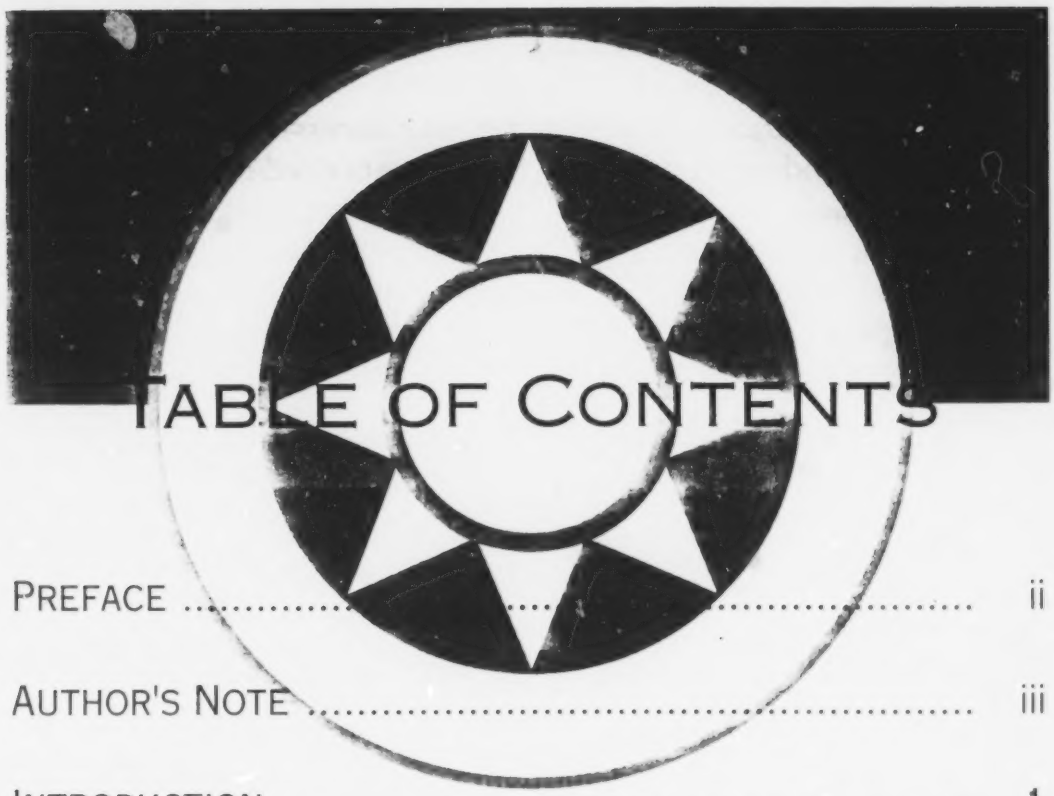

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# PREFACE

We are either enriched or divided by our diversity.

Since its founding, this nation has been a hotbed of conflicting ideas and beliefs. Debate is common. Questioning is a way of life.

The public schools are often at the center of these debates. In some cases, an individual or group might want to impose its political or religious views on students, who are a captive audience in our classrooms. A parent or other citizen may want to censor books in the school library because they don't match a particular firmly held belief.

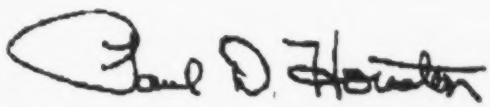
A democracy such as ours must tolerate many points of view. Therefore, public educators and the communities they serve are challenged to help students understand political and religious issues without proselytizing. Our nation was, after all, founded, at least in part, on the concept of separation of church and state.

Too often, communities become gridlocked in a contest of wills, going to the mat to decide once and for all whose beliefs will dominate. The results often are debilitating. Communities become divided against themselves.

Think of it this way. When elephants fight, the grass gets trampled. In this case, the grass is our children and their education.

That is why the American Association of School Administrators has published this booklet. As you share copies of the publication with educators, parents, and other citizens, and as you use its suggested format to stir discussions, you'll be able to find areas of both disagreement and shared belief. The process may not always bring agreement, but it should very well move people with a variety of viewpoints toward mutual understanding.

We believe that each and every community should seek common ground, and this publication will help.



Paul Houston
Executive Director
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# AUTHOR'S NOTE

During the past five years, I have worked with thousands of people in hundreds of schools, districts, communities, state departments of education, statehouses, foundations and other nonprofit organizations, national education organizations, and the U.S. Department of Education on communication and policy initiatives connected to school improvement. In addition, I've served on the board of education for the Littleton, Colorado, Public Schools during a time of controversy and crossfire.

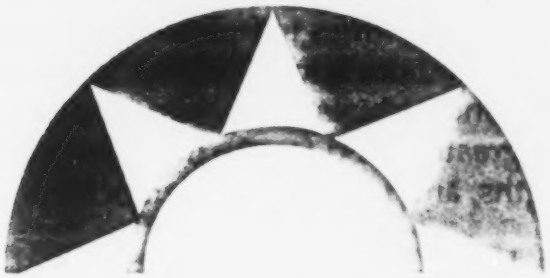
This booklet provides practical recommendations, not abstract theories, based on my experiences with what I've seen work and not work. There's no such thing, however, as a one-size-fits-all suggestion that can be duplicated from one place to the next. I urge you to "try these suggestions on" and tailor them to your situation.

I also urge you to develop the courage and motivation to begin the journey toward common ground, even though the journey takes a great deal of time, energy, and patience. As used in this booklet, the term "common ground" refers to the:

- Shared motivation of parents, educators, community members, and others to improve student achievement for all children.
- Commitment to reach collective decisions through democratic processes.
- Pledge to honor group decisions while ensuring that the interests of those not in the majority are respected.

I've observed that even though prejudices and fears based on race, religion, lifestyle, age, gender, and socioeconomic status abound in our country, people everywhere are growing weary of turmoil and hoping for a time of less hostility. Therefore, those of us seeking common ground should consider taking the first steps in a long overdue national journey from antagonism and strife to national civility and harmony. The risk and hope lie before us.

# INTRODUCTION



*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.*

First Amendment, U.S. Constitution

The First Amendment and nine others that comprise the Bill of Rights were written to safeguard our individual liberties because democracy depends on the independence and ingenuity of individuals. But in education, the decibel level of the individuals engaged in a national discourse has reached such a high pitch that more and more people are no longer listening to each other. Thousands of educators in schools and districts are facing unprecedented interest, concerns, and criticism from their communities. Subsequently, they often respond with dismay, anger, and defensiveness.

In many communities, the rhetoric, name calling, and behaviors have become strident enough to erode trust among people inside and outside of education and on various sides of the issues. (In this book, the phrase "inside education" means people who work for an education entity — schools, districts, state and national education agencies, and organizations — or people who earn at least part of their living in the field of education.)

When voices become hostile, the atmosphere around schools can feel more like a war than a discussion on how to ensure a good education for students. In the meantime, students are caught in the crossfire of these fierce "battles." For the sake of children, the crossfire must stop, or better yet, be avoided. People must begin seeking common ground and shared ideas on how education best serves students.

***A balance for the common good.*** The time is right to rebalance the safeguards guaranteed to individuals in the Bill of Rights. As a nation, we need common ground efforts that safeguard our collective interests and responsibilities to function as citizens in a local community, state, and nation. Such a balance allows synergy between and among individuals and groups to form. In turn, this synergy serves the greater good for the most people, illustrating the benefits, strengths, and resilience of democracy.

## How To Use This Book

This book is a step-by-step guide to help anyone, anywhere begin the journey toward common ground by:

- Understanding the political process,
- Clarifying ideas,
- Generating community conversation and debate, and
- Creating and sustaining common ground.

Before setting out on the common ground journey, however, the book makes several assumptions about public schools.
*Public schools should:*

- Respect the individual liberties, including religious beliefs, guaranteed to Americans in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.
- Continue to exist and always strive for ways to improve student learning for all children.
- Honor the individuality and needs of each and every student.
- Comply with existing laws and regulations at all levels of government.
- Reach out to a wide cross-section of the community, both internally and externally.
- Be honest in all communications.
- Realize all decisions will not please everyone, but that all decisions should ultimately be based on what's best for all students and their respective communities.



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*How To Avoid Crossfire and Seek Common Ground* is for those who have the courage and motivation to modify their personal agenda (but not to compromise individual liberties) and seek common ground built on what a community wants from its schools.

Summoning this needed courage and motivation is the hardest part of the common ground journey. It should be cultivated before conflict arises, not as a last resort. In a democracy, ideas are meant to be tested in the public forum through discussion and debate so they can be shaped into practices and policies that truly serve the public's interest.

***No pat answers.*** This book is not a course in conflict resolution, mediation, litigation, reconciliation, interpersonal communication, community organizing, marketing, or "citizen education." It will not provide a solution to all problems. And, it is not for people who don't want their ideas tested in the crucible of the "public forum" or who are "selling" or seeking "buy-in" of a specific agenda.

Remember, democracy at its best is a way of life for all citizens, not just a system of government. Democracy always has depended on individuals working together to identify and address shared concerns.

# 1. BELIEVING IN COMMON GROUND

Throughout this book, I've made recommendations based on my work with schools, districts, communities, and other groups across the country. This first chapter, however, is based specifically on my experience as a member of the board of education for the Littleton, Colorado, Public Schools. During my more than four years on Littleton's school board, I learned firsthand about the need to take the high road that sidesteps some of the crossfire and leads to common ground.

Located south of Denver, Littleton is a district of 22 schools and approximately 15,500 students (about 85 percent of whom are college-bound). Its operating budget is roughly $80 million. Until controversy over new education initiatives erupted within the community, Littleton was considered a national "lighthouse district" for those efforts.

## WHAT HAPPENED?

The district's plan for improving student achievement began in 1988 when the board of education unanimously adopted a strategic plan. Developed over 18 months with representative participation from various publics, including parents, teachers, community members, and business people, the plan had four priorities:

1. Adapt instruction and support services to better meet the changing needs of students.
2. Identify indicators and varied ways to assess progress toward student learning.
3. Explore, design, and implement elements of school-centered decision making.
4. Restructure all facets of the Littleton Public Schools to achieve long-term education success.

Subsequently, seven student learner "outcomes" were added to the strategic plan. In 1989 and 1991, board members reaffirmed the plan and a districtwide mission statement: Our actions will result in greater student self-esteem and performance.

Throughout the district, people in schools created the processes to develop grade-level outcomes and assessments to implement the strategic plan. By 1992, the board of education adopted performance-based graduation requirements for all three high schools.

***Concerns raised.*** That same year, some parents at one of the high schools voiced significant concerns about whether the school's new assessments would meet technical requirements, and about the manner in which the school's restructuring committee was functioning relative to Colorado's Sunshine Law (an open meetings/records law).

Early in 1993, three of the concerned parents sued the district's school restructuring committee and its subcommittees in county court. They charged the groups had violated the Sunshine Law and asked that the high school's restructuring efforts be stopped. Not surprisingly, the atmosphere at this school became adversarial, with real issues often lost in personality clashes. This negative climate spread throughout the district, putting the Littleton schools in the center of intense crossfire and controversy.

***The debate heats up.*** By the summer of 1993, two of the three plaintiffs in the lawsuit were candidates for the board of education. They asked another citizen to join them as a self-described "back-to-basics slate" and campaigned for the three open seats on the five-member board — and against what they termed "outcome-based education."

In addition, six other people, whose support for the district's strategic plan ranged from enthusiastic to lukewarm, ran for the school board. (I wasn't seeking re-election but was pulling for candidates who supported the 1988 strategic plan.)

A few months later, the court ruled that the high school's restructuring committee was a "local public body" subject to Colorado's Sunshine Law, but it did not throw out all restructuring efforts. In November, the back-to-basics slate won by a 2 to 1 margin. Voting was by mail, with approximately 45 percent of the registered voters returning ballots.

***Different views, new direction.*** Once elected, the new board of education took action on several issues, including:

- Halting performance-based graduation requirements.
- Stopping all work and staff development on outcomes.
- Negotiating a contract buyout of the previous superintendent.
- Accepting the resignation of 37 percent of the district's administrators and 10 percent of its teachers.
- Creating a new strategic plan.

## What Are the Lessons Learned?

Since the election, I've seen many of the initiatives I advocated halted or revised. However, I've also seen some new, positive initiatives from the incoming board majority. Not everything that was in place will be gone. Not everything that is now being advocated will be adopted. Through the efforts and commitments of many people, common ground will emerge in Littleton. And with similar dedication, common ground can emerge in this country's approximately 14,000 other school districts.

From personal experience, I know seeking common ground requires courage, selflessness, patience, and confidence in the good will of people and the merit of democratic processes.

***A starting point.*** Common ground begins when everyone with concerns and ideas about education — superintendents, administrators, teachers, principals, community members, students, civic and religious leaders — understands and practices the following basic strategies:

- Listen to a wide cross-section of people, including those who disagree, through a variety of ways and in many places.
- Anticipate issues and separate them from personalities.
- Don't label people as extremists or naysayers just because they disagree with you and ask tough questions.
- Set up formal processes to monitor, measure, and disseminate the results of decisions the board of education, school committees, or community advocacy groups make.
- Demonstrate clear evidence that pedagogical research and assessments you think are desirable also are technically sound.

- Create relationships built on trust and confidence as well as processes designed on the basis of efficiency, openness, and accountability.
- *Acknowledge and embrace the importance of all decisions and* actions withstanding public scrutiny, discussion, and debate.

# 2. UNDERSTANDING THE POLITICAL PROCESS

Most of us recognize that a culture of mistrust between citizens and government has developed in our country. Many people believe the political process that shapes government policy is something unsavory or even underhanded. In reality, the political process is as good or bad as the people who use it. As citizens, we need to understand the political process and work within it.

The "political process" basically means "people shaping policy in the public forum to serve the greater good for most citizens." It's a way of life many people fought for and one that has served Americans well for more than 200 years. When George Washington took office in 1789, Benjamin Franklin observed, "We have developed a republic, now all we have to do is keep it." Franklin's observation and inherent challenge still hold true.

## Many Voices, Many Opinions

These days, almost everyone has an opinion about what all levels of government should do, how to do it, and where to complain if there's a problem. This mindset certainly applies to education, where lots of people have different, often conflicting, ideas about schools and where they should be heading. Getting people to discuss what they disagree and agree on is an enormous challenge, especially if shrill voices and antagonistic behaviors exist.

This atmosphere of heated national dialogue is the environment some educators and others will face in their school improvement efforts. Quite often, you'll be advocating something different, a change from the way things were done in the past. Therefore, understanding the phenomena of change and advocacy, and how they relate to basic human nature, is helpful.

# Change Takes Time

Conventional wisdom says that everyone wants progress but no one wants change. Changing jobs, homes, or even eating habits is never a quick, easy process. Market research shows that different people accept change at different rates — and still other people never adapt to change:

> The spread of an idea or the penetration of a market by a new product is the diffusion process. The traditional view of the diffusion process includes five categories of adopters and the typical percentage of adopters in each category.
>
> | | |
> |---|---|
> | Innovators | **2.5 percent** |
> | Early Adopters | **13.5 percent** |
> | Early Majority | **34 percent** |
> | Late Majority | **34 percent** |
> | Laggards | **16 percent** |
>
> Source: Schoell, William F., and Guiltinan, Joseph P. (1992). *Marketing, Contemporary Concepts and Practices,* fifth edition.

A simplified version of the categories above breaks down like this:

| Percentage of People who accept change... | |
|---|---|
| Quickly | **15 percent** |
| After Others Do | **70 percent** |
| Very Late or Never | **15 percent** |

These percentages illustrate that any idea (including changes in teaching, testing, bus schedules, school boundaries, and education taxes) takes time to catch on, and it won't be universally accepted. Recognize this fact and concentrate your efforts on those who will or might agree with you.

However, be careful not to ignore, stereotype, or ridicule that 15 percent who are skeptical or may never accept your idea. In a democracy, everyone deserves respect and protection from insults and discrimination based on his or her opinions and beliefs. Furthermore, someone from that reluctant 15 percent may agree with you on a future issue.

# ADVOCACY

Whether we realize it or not, most of us have been advocates for something at some time, from suggesting what to have for dinner or what movie to attend to deciding what our volunteer group should do for a fundraiser or adopt as a priority.

Advocacy is not a passive, thumbs-up or thumbs-down activity. Traditionally, advocates for any cause, particularly for public policy, are involved actively in explaining their ideas and in enlisting public support for them.

As an advocate for specific ideas about what you believe should be done in education, you bear the responsibility for explaining 1) what you're for; 2) why, how, and when your ideas will be implemented; and 3) how results will be evaluated. But don't forget that true communication is two-way. Ask others to shoulder the same responsibility and share their ideas or concerns with you and others in the public forum.

As you begin sharing your ideas with others, take time to let people come to terms with the nature of change and advocacy. Change occurs slowly and incrementally because people need to understand and get used to working and thinking in different ways. Likewise, advocacy requires time to clarify ideas so they can be explained in a way that demonstrates their merit.

Remember, the nature of change and advocacy is a particularly important factor for people inside education. After all, employees are the people who will be asked to implement new ideas.

The three circles on the following pages reflect the possible primary origins (the major perspective that prompts someone to act) for ideas. The intersection of these circles illustrates what ideas will look like AFTER they go through the political process.

***The first step.*** As you and others seek common ground, you may need to give up on getting everything you advocated — as will other people. However, sharing and enriching each other's ideas encourages the best collective thinking about what's best for all children to emerge.

In addition, you may learn that some individuals and groups weren't represented in discussions and idea sharing. If this is the case, reach out to them. You'll want to include a wide cross-section of the community: women and men, people of various races and ages, individuals with disabilities or other special needs. We must all take responsibility for not discriminating or excluding others by making continuous efforts to reach them.

# Ideas Primarily Come From:

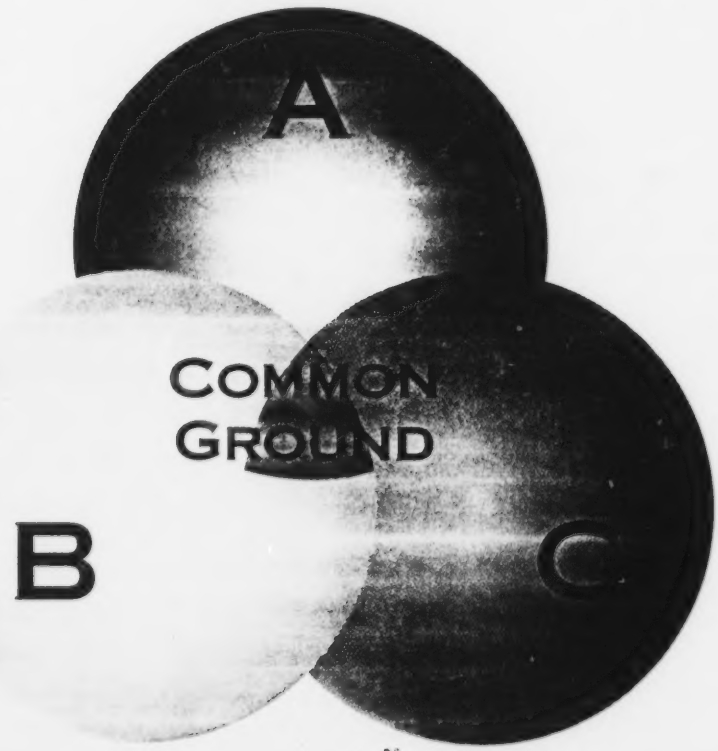
- Policymakers
- Appointed Officials
- Big Business Leaders
- National Organization Leaders (Education and noneducation)
- Political Party Leaders
- Others You May Add

## B: Community

- Business Owners (Real estate agents, physicians, attorneys, veterinarians, beauticians, barbers, restaurateurs, bowling alley operators, auctioneers, shop owners, etc.)
- Senior Citizens
- Veterans of Foreign Wars
- Civic and Religious Activists and Supporters
- Civil Rights Activists
- Members of Social/Hobby Clubs
- Players in Sports Leagues
- Employees and Elected Officials of Government Entities (City, county, recreation district, mass transit system, etc.)
- Others You May Add

- Students
- Parents
- Teachers
- Bus Drivers
- Custodians
- Maintenance Crew
- Professional Association Leaders (Teachers, administrators)
- Principals
- Superintendents
- Central Office Administrators
- Volunteers
- Boards of Education
- Others You May Add

## IDEAS WILL LOOK LIKE THIS— COMMON GROUND



# 3. CLARIFYING YOUR IDEAS

Even people who agree with you want to know the "what" and "why" behind your ideas. Therefore, clarifying exactly what your ideas are, including the issues, benefits, and drawbacks involved, is crucial. In addition, knowing how the political process works and how to use the public forum will shed a great deal of light on everyone's ideas.

Both those who have faith in another person's ideas and those who doubt them provide the twin forces to keep people communicating. Only through shared ideas and opinions can we hope to achieve common ground.

## Step 1: What Are the Major Issues?

One way to clarify ideas is by listing the major ones. Limit your list to 8 or 10 of the ideas most important to you. If your list is too long, it will be difficult to engage others in thoughtful dialogue and focus on subsequent decisions and actions.

After making your list, number the issues in order of importance. An issue is any trend or condition, internal or external, that affects or might affect the achievement of your goals. Examples of major issues in education are student achievement levels, curriculum content and academic rigor, middle to high school transitions, outcome-based education, site-based management, whole language, the openness of school or district meetings, charter schools, and the physical condition of school buildings.

As you talk and work with others, ask them to list the issues important to them. Then you can compare and discuss these lists to identify issues people have in common.

This activity should be done in small groups, possibly in one or two meetings of the same people. As you work together, you should begin to see how to work with others toward common ground.

| Issues | Rank |
|---|---|
| OBE | 2 |
| School facilities | 3 |
| Site-based management | 1 |
| Charter schools | 4 |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |

## Step 2: What Are the Elements of Each Issue?

After determining your major issues, you'll want to analyze each issue to identify positive, negative, and neutral/unknown elements. A careful examination of each issue makes it easier to create and focus interest and conversation clearly on potential decisions and actions. Clear focus helps prevent individuals and personalities from dominating dialogue.

The framework below analyzes the pro, con, and unknown elements of a sample education issue: site-based management or individual site councils. You might want to use this same framework to analyze the issues on your list, using a separate sheet of paper for each one.

(+) POSITIVE ELEMENTS:

- Partnerships and cooperation between administration, staff, parents, students, and community is a good way to share expertise, skills, and opinions.
- A more open flow of information and ideas is possible.
- Many perspectives help shape and continually improve curriculum, instruction, and testing.

(-) NEGATIVE ELEMENTS:

- Professional staff may be bypassed or not adequately listened to.
- Leadership may develop slowly.
- Council members may be difficult to recruit.
- Training for how to set up and run school councils may be nonexistent or inadequate.

(?) UNKNOWN/NEUTRAL ELEMENTS:

- There's no proof site-based management improves student learning.
- It's unclear what circumstances would cause the board of education to overrule site decisions.

***Involve others.*** Encourage others to analyze their issues in a similar way to build a structure for conversation and debate — and to begin identifying areas of agreement and disagreement.

The next step is to expand these initial conversations among people who already are interested and involved, knowing that conversations eventually need to include those who haven't yet expressed an interest or a desire to be involved.

# 4. GENERATING COMMUNITY CONVERSATION AND DEBATE

To get other community members interested and involved, you need to discuss an idea in ways that matter to them. For example, if you're advocating a charter school, people without children in school are likely to be most interested in the costs of running the school. However, a parent of a child with a disability may be more concerned about how students will be selected and what assistance will be provided to students with special needs.

## Do Your Homework

While you shouldn't ignore any facet of your idea's purpose and implementation, honor people's concerns by beginning with the information that's important to them. Acknowledge the interests and concerns of different groups by asking them to share their thoughts about education. However, don't be dishonest or adapt your ideas to various people's views as a way to demonstrate artificial caring or to manipulate others. Be genuine and accept the listener's reaction — good, bad, or indifferent. And let's face it, some people will have no particular interest in your ideas about education.

On the other hand, you may be in a situation where conversation and debate already exist because of controversy. In fact, conversation might be strident, unfocused, and unproductive. If that's the case, you'll still need to bring the discussion to the level of what's best for children and to urge more people to get involved in the dialogue. Controversies can be short-lived and involve only a small group of people, but the polarization and distrust that develops usually lingers for a long time.

***On hostile ground.*** If you're in a location rife with controversy, you'll need a process to find common ground if you hope to

improve education. But finding this common ground is more difficult and time consuming. You and others will need to make concerted efforts to work on rebuilding trust. (The ground rules for meetings and informal conversation on page 23 may be helpful as you address the need for trust.)

## Identify Interested People

Some people may not be interested or want to be involved in education issues, but many will. Some of the major "publics" or "role groups" (people who tend to be identified by a particular role they hold in your school or district) you'll want to include are:

- Students
- Parents
- Teachers
- Superintendent and other central office administrators
- Professional educator associations and their leadership (administrator and teacher associations)
- Classified staff and their associations
- Policymakers (local and state boards of education, state and national legislators, city and county elected and appointed officials, special water and recreation district board members)
- Educators in postsecondary institutions
- Reporters and editors in the news media
- Business people (from small "mom and pop" stores to big business)
- Civic leaders and organization members
- Religious leaders and church members
- Youth service providers
- Other groups specific to your community.

As you can see, some people are part of the political process outlined in the second section. And others, such as board of education members or parent volunteers, aren't exclusively internal

or external to schools and will have multiple perspectives on education issues.

In addition, some of those listed are "opinion makers" (people looked to for leadership or unusually helpful insight) or representatives of specific constituencies (members or citizens from the congressional or state legislative districts or municipalities they represent).

***Critical groups.*** Boards of education and other policymakers are particularly important to include in your conversations if you hope to change policies or formal actions. For example, the perspectives of these individuals should be sought before adopting or eliminating a policy on site-based management or becoming an active participant in Goals 2000, the national education initiative to improve student learning based on eight goals. (See pages 24 and 25 for more on policymakers.)

Engaging a wide cross-section of the community means having conversations with many people — and that means wise time management. By thinking through a list of people with whom you want to be conversing and building working relationships, you can better organize your time and efforts. And, as you talk and work with people, ask them to listen and share your ideas and related issues, and report back to you what they learned. That way the conversation about education will continue to expand and become even more reciprocal.

## Guidelines for Community Involvement

Here are some points to keep in mind as you foster community conversation and debate toward common ground.

*Do:*

- Honor people's beliefs and values by sincerely listening to them.
- Respect existing laws and district/school policies.
- Convey a sense of openness and a desire to pursue the common ground to do what's best for children.
- Use plain, descriptive language — avoid jargon (professional terms that lay people may not understand), buzzwords, and cliches (words that sound good but may have no meaning for the audience).

- Welcome questions and even criticism as opportunities to explain the results and benefits of the ideas you advocate.

*Don't:*

- Label people with negative terms such as "radicals" or "extremists" just because they disagree with you.
- Fail to listen to people with whom you have a personality clash. Instead, look for the issues being raised, not personality traits.
- Use expertise or charisma to impress people and ultimately fail to provide useful, understandable information.
- Avoid asking others to describe how they'll evaluate the results of their proposed actions (such as student achievement scores, number of people participating in school councils, district's financial status).

## Find Interested People

How do you find interested people? The answer is twofold: Seek them out and have them come to you.

First, go to places where people congregate. Where do people in your community work, shop, eat, exercise, have fun, or get their hair cut? People have many demands on their time, so it's often difficult for them to carve out an extra hour to go to a specific location and talk about education.

However, avoid just dropping in on people in their homes or workplaces. Some people may consider these impromptu visits an intrusion — even if they agree with you. Instead, make arrangements ahead of time with the owners or managers of businesses and organizations to engage people in conversation that doesn't disrupt or distract others.

Finally, don't forget informal, unplanned conversations at such venues as back-to-school nights, the grocery store, or the gas station can produce a good exchange of ideas and concerns. Be open to others, anytime, anywhere, and get names, addresses, and phone numbers to stay in touch.

However, accept this fact right from the start: Not everyone will share your ideas or the amount of time and energy you want to invest in education issues. Just do your best to reach out and enthusiastically embrace the common ground that you can help develop.

***Seek people out.*** Inviting people to formal meetings for discussions on specific topics is also an effective way to reach desired publics. Compile a list of people to be invited (by phone and mail) and to stay in touch with for reactions, comments, and new information.

When you schedule formal meetings, respect everyone's time and opinions by planning an agenda in advance. Successful meetings also:

- Take place in convenient locations (don't always have meetings in school facilities — go out into the community).
- Establish ground rules for all meetings and subsequent discussions, decisions, and actions.
- Set an agenda specifying topics and time allocations for each item.
- Appoint a meeting chair who is an objective third party with no stake in whose ideas gain the most support (a local business person, civic/religious leader, League of Women Voters moderator, Junior League or American Association of University Women facilitator, or whoever the community believes is impartial).
- Designate effective group discussion leaders and recorders.
- Agree on a framework for subsequent meetings.
- Set benchmarks and timelines for evaluating efforts.

For your initial meeting(s), you may want to use the political process, issues list, and analysis frameworks from earlier sections as discussion starters. Whatever techniques you use, focus conversation on specific issues and ideas to be addressed.

***More ground rules for meetings.*** Remember, in effective meetings, no one person or group:

- Dominates.
- Engages in name calling, exaggerations, or accusations against one person or group.
- Misrepresents someone else's view to make a personal viewpoint look better.

Instead, everyone:

- Respects and listens to all points of view.

- Continually tries to expand conversation about all ideas raised to others not in attendance in an effort to stay connected with as many people and viewpoints as possible.
- Tries to reach common ground but amicably agrees to disagree if that's not possible. (Those who disagree should feel free to pursue their ideas with others without hard feelings on the part of anyone.)

## Pay Attention to the Media and to Policymakers

As you strive to generate community conversation around ideas to improve student learning, remember to involve the media and policymakers. Both have constitutional authority for their role in society.

*Helpful hints for working with the media:*

- Be prepared for interviews by continually thinking about questions the general public may have. These questions define what "news" is, as opposed to what you might like the media to cover.
- Be candid, brief, and honest.
- Your appearance, tone of voice, and mannerisms communicate up to 70 percent of what you're conveying; words comprise only a small part of your message.
- Listen carefully to questions and rephrase them if they're accusatory or inaccurate.
- Underscore key points with colorful quotes but make sure they contain useful information.
- Get to know local reporters especially if they're assigned to cover education. Also, be sensitive to their deadlines.

In working with policymakers, you often will come in direct contact with members of your local board of education, but seldom with state and national officials. The points listed above for media relations also apply to face-to-face communications with policymakers.

However, you'll frequently need to write letters to policymakers. Follow these tips to write effective letters.

*Do:*

- Write clearly and briefly, focusing on one issue per letter.
- Make your views known early when the issue arises and write in your own words.
- Include your name, signature, and address (anonymous letters have zero credibility).
- Write again after action is taken on an issue.

*Don't:*

- Be discourteous, hostile, sarcastic, or threatening.
- Begin by saying, "As one of the people who elected you, I demand..."
- Apologize for taking the policymaker's time.
- Be vague or disorganized in presenting your thoughts.

If you don't know your district or state process for taking action on various items or holding hearings, find out. Usually, such information is readily available by phone at the district office, capitol building, or legislative offices.

## Remember "Internal" Publics

"Community conversations" may convey the notion that broad-based dialogue about education is just for the community around the school or district, not for people who serve in the education system. However, community means everyone who lives and works within the specified area. As stated earlier, school employees usually end up implementing the ideas people have for education — making them an integral part of the community whether or not they also happen to live there.

As you follow the suggestions outlined in this section, you'll need to adapt some of them. "Going to where people are" is easier in the case of internal publics — employees are in schools and districts. However, you'll need to arrange mutually convenient times for discussions and meetings.

If you're a superintendent, principal, or teacher, you have well-established times for communicating with staff. But if you're not

part of the team that runs schools, you'll have to contact staff on your own. You may want to make some key contacts to identify ways and times to set up conversations with employees.

On the other hand, you shouldn't need to adapt the recommendations for meeting planning, the ground rules for behavior, ways to foster conversation, and tips for dealing with the media and policymakers. These recommendations apply to everyone.

# 5. CREATING AND SUSTAINING COMMON GROUND

The most satisfying part of the common ground journey is seeing your ideas translated into actions that will make a positive difference. However, this journey also requires openness and a willingness to consider the views of the majority as you ask them to consider yours.

You've generated thorough debate and discussion about ideas to improve student learning. Now it's time to identify the specifics of common ground and decide what actions are needed to implement these specifics.

## Look for Shared Concerns

Return to the example of site-based management outlined earlier as an issue where you're seeking common ground. After you and others list the positives, negatives, and unknowns/neutrals, summarize the analyses and illustrate the results using the same framework.

From these lists, identify what people have in common. You'll probably find that supporters and opponents of site-based management share many of the same hopes and concerns. This common ground may lead to a mutually agreed-on method for using site-based management councils, such as the sample one below.

**A site-based management council in our district should:**

- Balance staff/nonstaff perspectives and responsibilities.
- Set up training and recruiting procedures.
- Create guidelines for operating councils and making decisions.
- Define the councils' relationships to the board of education.
- Take responsibility for contributing ideas to improve student learning.

- Establish an evaluation mechanism and process to measure its effectiveness in improving student learning and communicating with a wide cross-section of the community.

To use another example, you and others might analyze the physical condition of schools. As people identify the positive, negative, and neutral/unknown elements of this issue, you'll again see similarities — and the beginning of common ground.

## Physical Condition of School Buildings

(+) Positive Elements:

- Sufficient space is available.
- Schools are conveniently located to serve neighborhoods.
- Schools have adequate security.
- The district's bond rating is good.
- Both operating and capital budgets are in good shape.

(-) Negative Elements:

- Electrical wiring and the physical condition of buildings is inadequate to accommodate needed computers.
- Significant construction is necessary to make schools more accessible to people with disabilities.
- The district potentially might be getting less money from the state.
- Repairs could be safely delayed.

(?) Unknown Elements:

- Would the community approve a bond election to fund a new school(s) or major repairs to existing schools?

- What will be the actual level of state funding in the future?
- Will enrollment increase or decrease?
- Are there places other than schools where students can use computers conveniently and efficiently?

Common ground that might emerge from these types of comments could include:

- Asking people at the local college to volunteer students and faculty in appropriate departments to survey the community about what people think school priorities ought to be and if they are willing to increase taxes to benefit schools.
- Inviting a group of people to serve as an ad hoc committee to do an independent review of the condition of schools and report to the district and community within three months.
- Postponing the purchase of computers until it's clear they can be installed and work effectively in current school buildings. Ask the company who's selling the computers to invest some money in assessing conditions of schools to see if technology purchases can be properly and economically installed.
- Talking with legislators about how they see the long term funding picture for education.

In other words, provide a framework to objectively listen to, understand, evaluate, summarize, and draw conclusions from what many people say. Once again, you'll need to do this process in a variety of settings (internally and externally to education) and over a period of time — perhaps four to six months. Although that may sound like a long time, be patient. Your efforts now will save time later on when you're ready to act on common ground initiatives.

***Create ripples.*** You're never going to get 100 percent agreement on what different people think about and what people believe ought to be done. However, if you continually reach out to people through listening and sharing, you'll create a ripple effect that will help you keep in touch with a representative cross-section of people in your community. And when the time comes, you'll be better prepared for common ground.

## Implementation Requirements

As you pursue common ground, the following elements need to be in place:

- A timetable for decisions, actions, and desired results. Criteria for evaluating the desired and undesired effects of decisions, actions, and results should be specified — including costs versus benefits, increases in student achievement, more people involved in decisions, impact on dropout and graduation rates, and anything else that is important and can be measured.
- Ways to distribute results and convene those involved to discuss needed changes (mid-course corrections) in what actions are being taken. Communication vehicles may include letters, memos, special reports, news releases, media briefings, the informal grapevine (people randomly sharing information when they happen to talk with someone), telephone "trees" (an established list of callers and people to be called when information needs to be shared and when reactions to certain events are sought).
- A mechanism to make mid-course corrections, if needed, such as conversations and meetings to revisit the frameworks previously used to share ideas and develop common ground.
- Agreed-on closure for conversations when common ground is reached on a specific issue, and ways to decide what, if any, potential common ground issues might be tackled next (possibly a final meeting where people converse as a large group or in smaller groups to discuss next steps).

***A final reminder.*** Again, when you're working within a school or district, the above steps are easier than if you're external to the daily operation of schools. In either case, you'll want to make contact with a key person to arrange mutually convenient times for discussions and meetings that don't disrupt school business or infringe on people's personal time.

# CONCLUSION

The journey to common ground can be frustrating and exhausting, but it's also satisfying and exhilarating. As you seek common ground, draw courage from the knowledge that your pursuit:

- Honors the principles on which our nation was founded and demonstrates that democracy is a way of life, not just a form of government.
- Ensures all children will have access to a quality education and to the benefits it provides.
- Allows you to grow personally and professionally by opening your mind to other ideas and possibilities.

As educators, parents, community members, and citizens, let's work together for common ground to help our children today . . . and to pave the way for them to seek common ground in the future.

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